

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8193
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

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E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, ELAB, TS
SUBJ: HABIB ACHOUR RETURNS FROM VISIT TO TRIPOLI, ATTACKS
PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA

1. TUNISIAN TRADE UNION LEADER HABIB ACHOUR RETURNED TO TUNIS SEPTEMBER 6 FROM A WEEKEND VISIT TO TRIPOLI. ACCORDING TO PRESS ACCOUNTS BEFORE HIS DEPARTURE, LIBYA VISIT WAS INTENDED TO CLEAR UP MISUNDERSTANDINGS OVER WORKING CONDITIONS AND MINIMUM WAGES FOR TUNISIAN EMIGRANT WORKERS IN LIBYA. TUNISIAN PRESS GAVE BRIEF ACCOUNT OF HIS STAY IN TRIPOLI ON SEPTEMBER 6, BUT DID NOT REPORT HIS RETURN OR ANY DETAILS OF VISIT OTHER THAN OFFICIAL CALLS ON LIBYAN TRADE UNION LEADERS AND ON KHOUILDI LAHMIDI.

2. RELIABLE JOURNALISTIC SOURCE TOLD US THAT ACHOUR MADE STATEMENT TO LIBYAN NEWS AGENCY (ARNA) ON SEPTEMBER 5 BEFORE HIS DEPARTURE IN WHICH HE DECLARED THAT HE HAS LONG BEEN CONVINCED THAT TUNISIAN-LIBYAN BILATERAL RELATIONS SHOULD BE IMPROVED. HE NOTED, HOWEVER, THAT "CERTAIN ELEMENTS" REFUSED TO ACCEPT THIS IMPROVEMENT AND PUT OBSTACLES IN PATH OF RAP-PROCHEMENT. ACHOUR DECLARED THAT THIS ATTEMPT FAILED AND THAT

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"THEIR PLANS HAVE BEEN UNMASKED BEFORE PUBLIC OPINION." ACHOUR FURTHER STATED TO ARNA THAT "THESE ELEMENTS" HAD SOUGHT TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF HIS ABSENCE IN SWITZERLAND (ACHOUR HEADED THE TUNISIAN WORKER DELEGATION TO THE ILO CONVENTION IN JUNE) TO SABOTAGE RAPPROCHEMENT BUT THAT "WE WERE ABLE TO DEFEAT THEIR ATTEMPTS."

3. ON HIS RETURN TO TUNIS ACHOUR CALLED A PRESS CONFERENCE SEPTEMBER 6 IN WHICH HE MADE FURTHER STATEMENTS. HE SAID THAT MOHAMED MASMOUDI IS THE ONLY TUNISIAN POLITICAN CAPABLE OF RESOLVING TUNISIA'S DIFFICULTIES WITH THE EEC, WITH ALGERIA AND WITH THE ARAB WORLD BECAUSE OF HIS INTERNATIONAL STANDING. TELLING THE PRESS THAT HE HAD MET WITH MASMOUDI IN TRIPOLI, ACHOUR SAID THAT THE ATTEMPTS TO PIN FULL RESPONSIBILITY ON MASMOUDI FOR THE JANUARY 1974 JERBA UNITY DECLARATION WITH LIBYA AND TO DRAG HIM INTO COURT FOR PRIVATE BUSINESS DEALINGS IN LATE 1974 WERE ONLY WEAK ATTEMPTS BY SOME ELEMENTS TO DESTROY MASMOUDI. MASMOUDI WAS EXPelled FROM THE PSD, ACHOUR POINTED OUT, BUT HE REMAINS A "FIRST CLASS CITIZEN."

4. THESE STATEMENTS BY ACHOUR WERE NOT PUBLISHED IN THE SEPTEMBER 7 PRESS. HE ASSURED USLTHAT THEY WILL APPEAR IN THIS FRIDAY'S ISSUE OF ECH-CHAAB, THE UGTT'S WEEKLY PAPER.

5. ACHOUR'S STATEMENTS IN TRIPOLI AND TUNIS ON SEPTEMBER 5. AND 6 ARE UNEQUIVOCAL ATTACKS ON PRIME MINISTER HEDI NOUIRA. ACHOUR LEFT NO DOUBT THAT HE HOLDS NOUIRA RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DETERIORATION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN TUNISIA AND LIBYA IN LATE MAY AND EARLY JUNE OVER THE CONTEINENTAL SHELF DISPUTE, JUST AFTER ACHOUR HAD RETURNED FROM TRIPOLI WITH PROMISES FROM QADHAFI FOR IMPROVED RELATIONS (SEE TUNIS 3628). ACHOUR'S WARM WORDS OF SUPPORT FOR MASMOUDI ARE ALSO DIRECT ATTACKS AGAINST NOUIRA SINCE THEY CREDIT THE PRIME MINISTER'S

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LEADING POLITICAL ENEMY WITH A CAPACITY TO RESOLVE PROBLEMS THAT NOUIRA HAS, ACCORDING TO ACHOUR, SO FAR FAILED TO RESOLVE.

6. ACHOUR TOLD EMBASSY OFFICER SEPTEMBER 7 THAT UGTT HAS VIGOROUSLY PROTESTED BLACKOUT ON HIS SEPTEMBER 6 PRESS CONFERENCE IN TELEGRAM TO NOUIRA. THIS PROTEST CALLED THE BLACKOUT A "FLAGRANT OUTRAGE" AGAINST FREEDOMS OF THE PRESS AND EXPRESSION AS SPELLED OUT IN THE CONSTITUTION, DEMANDED THE FULL PUBLICATION OF ACHOUR'S STATEMENTS, AND GAVE FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONSEQUENCES OF ACTIONS THAT MIGHT BE TAKEN BY UGTT TO THOSE WHO ORDERED THE BLACKOUT. ACHOUR TOLD US THAT HE CONSIDERS MOHAMED SAYAH AND HEDI NOUIRA TO BE BEHIND BLACKOUT. HE ASSERTED ALSO THAT SAYAH IS AGAIN SEEKING TO UNDERMINE THE UGTT'S ROLE AS TUNISIA'S SOLE TRADE UNION ORGANIZATION.

7. ACHOUR MADE BRIEF REMARKS AS WELL ABOUT PRIME MINISTER NOUIYA, TELLING US HAT HE COULD NO LONGER BE TRUSTED. HE ASSERTED THAT NOUIRA TAKES ALL HIS ADVICE FROM BUSINESSMEN AND FARMERS AND IGNORES THE CONCERNS OF TRADE UNIONISTS. FINALLY, ACHOUR TOLD US THAT HE CONSIDERS NOUIRA TO BE POLITICALLY FINISHED AND NOT LIKELY TO LAST LONG AS PRIME MINISTER.

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8. ACHOUR HAS TAKEN A BOLD MOVE IN OPPOSING NOUIRA PUBLICLY AND WE UNDERSTAND THAT SENIOR GOT OFFICIALS ARE DEEPLY ANGERED AT HIM. IT APPEARS THAT ACHOUR HAS GIVEN UP HOPE OF INFLUENCING NOUIRA TO FOLLOW POLICIES THAT THE UGTT FAVORS AND HAS CHOSEN INSTEAD A POSTURE OF DIRECT OPPOSITION. IN CONTEXT OF TUNISIAN PUBLIC LIFE, HOWEVER, THERE IS LITTLE ROOM FOR OPPOSITION POLITICS AND IT IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY THAT ACHOUR WOULD EAGERLY BANISH HIMSELF TO THE POLITICAL WILDERNESS. HIS ATTACKS ON NOUIRA COULD REFLECT A BELIEF THAT PRIME MINISTER'S DAYS ARE INDEED NUMBERED AND THAT IT IS NOT ONLY POLITICALLY SAFE BUT OPPORTUNIE TO MOVE INTO OPPOSITION.

9. WHILE ACHOUR'S TRIP TO LIBYA WAS BILLED AS A MISSION TO DEFEND INTERESTS OF TUNISIAN EMIGRANT WORKERS, LITTLE HAS BEEN SAID BY ACHOUR OF THAT QUESTION SINCE HE RETURNED TO TUNIS. IT WOULD APPEAR THAT POLITICS AND NOT SOCIAL AFFAIRS WAS THE MAIN ORDER OF BUSINESS IN TRIPOLI AND ACHOUR'S CONTACTS THERE WITH MOHAMED MASMOUDI PROVIDE FURTHER INDICATION THAT ACHOUR HAS CHOSEN TO WORK MORE OPENLY TO REPLACE NOUIRA AS PRIME MINISTER NOW.

10. WE HAVE JUST BEEN TOLD BY NORMALLY RELIABLE SOURCE THAT
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DESTOURIAN SOCIALIST PARTY POLITICAL BUREAU MET EVENING OF SEPTEMBER 7 TO DISCUSS ACHOUR'S STATEMENTS. ACCORDING TO THIS SOURCE, ACHOUR FOUND HIMSELF CONFRONTED BY POLITICAL BUREAU UNITED AGAINST HIM AND HE REACTED BY BACKING OFF FROM HIS STRONG ANTI-NOUIRA STAND. OUR SOURCE BELIEVED THAT THE POLITICAL BUREAU HAD BEEN GALVANIZED INTO SUPPORTING NOUKIRA AGAINST ACHOUR BY A STRONG VOTE OF CONFIDENCE FROM BOURGUIBA FOR THE PRIME MINISTER. (WE NOTE THAT NOUIRA MET WITH BOURGUIBA EARLIER IN MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 7.) ACCORDING TO OUR SOURCE, POLITICAL BUREAU WILL MEET AGAIN FRIDAY EVENING IN TUNIS. THIS MEETING WILL BE OPEN TO PUBLIC AND NOUIRA WILL MAKE MAJOR ADDRESS.

11. TUNISIAN PRESS OF SEPTEMBER 8 NOTED ONLY THAT POLITICAL BUREAU HAD HELD MEETING EVENING OF SEPTEMBER 7 AND GAVE NO DETAILS AS TO SUBJECTS DISCUSSED. LEAD EDITORIAL IN PSD PARTY DAILY L'ACTION WAS VERY STRONG, HOWEVER, IN CONDEMNING UNNAMED PERSONS TO SPREADING FALSE RUMORS OF IMPENDING CHANGES IN GOVERNMENT AND NEW PRICE INCREASES (READ ACHOUR) AND VERY STRONG IN DEFENDING FIFTH ECONOMIC PLAN AND GOVERNMENT'S REALISTIC AND AMBITIOUS PROGRAMS (READ NOUIRA). IT WOULD APPEAR WE ARE APPROACHING A SHAKE DOWN IN THE TUNISIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM, IF NOT A SHOWDOWN. BY SATURDAY MORNING WE SHOULD KNOW WHICH IT WILL BE.

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